

Death by Suburb sermon series
#2 – Silence: Can You Hear Me Now?
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We are afraid of silence. It's a plain and simple fact that we'd rather have some mindless TV show that we're not even watching blaring in the background rather than face silence. Even in our everyday conversation, we avoid it. I teach in my Public Speaking class about vocalized pauses. You know what those are? "Um," "like," "you know." And our brain uses those almost involuntarily to avoid leaving a gap of silence until our next thought. So instead of a noiseless pause until our next word, we break the silence with "Umm..."

I want to try an experiment. When I ask, I want you to close your eyes. I'm going to be quiet for a certain amount of time – no cheering! – and I want you to raise your hand when you think one minute has elapsed. No fair counting in your head! So I'll shut up and turn around, we'll have total quiet, and you should raise your hand when you think we've reached the one minute mark. Got it? Go!

How did that feel? It was very awkward for me. I kept waiting for someone to say something. Moments of silence feel like eternities to us, because we are so used to having noise in our lives. Somebody should be saying something! When I first started making hospital visits in seminary, I had a lot of trouble being in a room with someone without saying something. Surely there was something I could say to help. The silence, as they say, was deafening.

Why are we so afraid of silence? The irony is that it is in the silence where we are mostly likely to hear God. And yet, our lives are absolutely overflowing with noise. Here's my theory about our fear of silence: we are afraid to be quiet because when we are, it means we are not speaking. And when we are not speaking, that means we are not in control of the conversation.

And if you're like me, you like to be in control. There's a name for people like us: control freaks. That sounds so negative! But I think in reality we are all control freaks. Who likes to be out of control? We all want a hand in what is going to happen. And when we're quiet, when we create space in our lives for God to speak, we don't have the floor.

This feels so strange to us because our world is built around control. So much control in our lives is put right at our fingertips. We control what channels we watch, the exact temperature of our surroundings, the seconds it takes to nuke our dinners, and the exact moment the sprinklers come on to water our lawn. We can pay bills, order Christmas presents, and make plans for dinner, all with the click of the mouse.

And with increasing technology, we are becoming more and more in control of our cars, houses, and through medical advances, our own bodies. We can take medicine to help us lose weight, or to put on muscle, to grow hair or to get rid of wrinkles. The prediction is that, as these advances increase, the average life span of humans will skyrocket well above 100. We are in control. We are, as David Goetz said, "The Lord of the Suburb."

We believe we have the ability to will our world into being. We create and live in the world we want. To the finest detail, we can tailor almost every facet of our existence to our specifications. In a world we will into being, there's not much need for mystery,

because we believe nothing is outside our control. We can protect my family from burglars, offensive music, and mosquito bites. What color do you want your walls? Your hair? Do you want to know your neighbors, or have a privacy fence to keep them out? How big do you want your TV to be? What temperature do you want your side of the car? How comfy do you want your side of the mattress? We are in control.

Almost. OK, not even almost. We are not in control. We don't like to hear that, but we aren't. In an article about the illusion of control, the author said, "Death always drives the fastest car on the highway." In other words, no matter how luxurious your SUV with the leather seats, DVD players, and heated cupholders, you still have to stop and wait when a funeral passes.

We are not in control. But we like to think that we are, because the alternative is too much for us to bear, so we design and insulate our lives to give us the illusion of control. We do this in order not to face reality. As Eric Sandras says, "We spend a lot of time distracting ourselves in order to keep from thinking about the things we don't want to think about, like doubt, discouragement, and death."

But even in our highly controlled world, we still get glimpses of the larger truths. There's an a cappella group called the Bobs who have a song about a man who almost has it all. One of the verses goes like this: "I got Persian rugs, I got exterminated bugs, I got a house that goes from over there to here, my basement's full of fine imported beer, but I got somethin' -- somethin' in my ear. I got tubeless tires, I got phones without wires, I got a hundred-year-old bonsai redwood tree, I've had successful arthroscopic surgery (on his knee), But last Friday a pigeon pooped on me."

In other words, we can get our MBA from Harvard, have over-achieving kids, drive cars that cost more than our first house, wear clothes that cost more than our first car, but when we walk our dog, we still have to carry a pooper scooper. We can try to trick ourselves into believing we're in control, but in the end, we're not in control.

If we want to go deeper spiritually, the first thing we have to do is relinquish our illusion of control and turn that over to God. David Goetz says, "In true spirituality the first act is a decision not to act, which goes against all we believe. Shouldn't we be doing something for Jesus? But before we do, we must be: to listen and wait for God, to make space for God."

At first, that sounds scary: listen, wait, make space. We're used to speaking, acting, taking up space. What would it be like if we followed Jesus' example? Mark tells us, "Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Go off alone? I don't know about you, but I don't like to be alone. When I'm with other people, I feel needed, loved, important. But when I'm alone, I'm reminded of just how small I am and how big God is. Being alone can feel so...lonely.

That's why I think our idea of "getting away" is a walk in the Forest Preserve or a weekend in Wisconsin...with a few thousand other people who are looking for some solitude. Can we ever really get away like Jesus did? I'd love to take the morning to get away and pray, but have you seen my email inbox lately? How do we get away in suburbia?

Here's some good news for us: Goetz makes the point that quietness is more inside space than outside space. He says, "Solitude begins with the practice of being still. For one minute, two minutes, five minutes -- to rest from our pursuit of efficiency." To

paraphrase the psalmist, be still and know that I am God – and you are not. Being still reminds us that God is in control, and we are called to simply be, not do.

This is not easy. I struggle with being still. And, being the control person I am, if I'm going to take time to be still, I want results. I want something to show for it. I want a transcript of my lengthy and enlightening conversation with God. If I can will my world into being, I should be able to will my God into conversation. And if God won't speak to me, at least I can keep talking and talking and talking to him. As long as there's no silence.

There's a Zen saying that goes, "Only speak if you can improve the silence." I believe that it is only when we are truly still that we can know God most deeply. But that takes discipline. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says, "It's not easy to sit and trust that in solitude God will speak to you – not as a magical voice but that he will let you know something gradually over the years."

Years? I don't have years! If I can have popcorn in three minutes and my clothes cleaned in an hour, I don't want to have to wait years for anything. But it's taken so many years to fill up our lives with noise that it's going to take awhile to begin to empty it out, to clear some space in the clutter for God to come and abide with us.

Is it possible to live the deeper life and the noisy life? Maybe, but I doubt it. And yet our lives are so full of noise, it's hard to imagine living any other way. The reality is that if we aren't intentional about building quietness into our lives, it will be quickly eaten up by the 100 things we have to do.

But if we're willing to try, the rewards can be renewing. Eric Sandras gives this advice: "In the morning, or in the evening, take five minutes and refuse to turn on any noise-making device (that can include family members). The regular exercise of silence can flush our minds clean of unwanted noise." Just sit. Just be. Breathe. Listen. Give up your control. Be still. Look, the noise will still be waiting for you when you're done. I promise. But for those few moments, remind yourself who is really the Lord in your life. Be still, and know that God is God – and you are not.